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Viewing cable 06RIYADH3312, THE SAUDI SHI'A: WHERE DO THEIR LOYALTIES LIE?

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SUBJECT: THE SAUDI SHI'A: WHERE DO THEIR LOYALTIES LIE?

REF: A. RIYADH 3301

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (S) Some Sunni Arab leaders, including Egypt's President Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah, have recently publicly questioned the loyalties of Arab Shi'a populations in the Middle East. Privately, senior Saudi officials raise similar concerns. Given the ongoing sectarian conflict in Iraq, increasing regional tensions vis-a-vis Shi'a Iran, and the tenuous status of Saudi Shi'a within their own country, the question of whether Saudi Shi'a loyalties belong primarily with Saudi Arabia - or, alternatively, to their coreligionists elsewhere in the Gulf - is a timely one. It is also of central concern to U.S. strategic interests in the region, given the concentration of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population in its oil producing areas.

¶12. (S) Our conclusion, based on discussions with a broad spectrum of Saudi Shi'a contacts over the past eight months, is that most Saudi Shi'a remain committed to the agreement reached between the Saudi Shi'a leadership and King Fahd in 1993-4, whereby Shi'a leaders agreed to pursue their goals within the Kingdom's political system in return for the King's promise to improve their situation. Saudi Shi'a have deep religious ties to Iraq and Iran and are inspired by the newfound religious freedom and political power of the Iraqi Shi'a; they also have a lengthy history of persecution by the Al-Saud and face continuing discrimination (ref B). Nonetheless, their leaders still appear committed to working for reform from within, a strategy that, thanks to King Abdullah, is slowly bearing fruit. In our view, it would require a major internal or external stimulus to move the Saudi Shi'a toward confrontation with Riyadh. Such stimuli could include a major shift in SAG policy or leadership, the spread of uncontaminated sectarian violence to the Kingdom, or a major change in regional security arrangements, especially escalating regional conflict involving Shi'a (ref C). Absent these circumstances, the vast majority of Saudi Shi'a are not likely to demonstrate significant external political loyalties, either to Iran or to any inchoate notion of a "Shi'a crescent." End summary.

A Tactical Choice: Advocating for Rights from Within

¶13. (SBU) At 1.5 to 2 million strong, the Shi'a comprise 10 to 15 percent of Saudi citizens. They are concentrated in the Eastern Province (EP), particularly the oasis areas of Qatif (where the population is overwhelmingly Shi'a) and Al-Ahsa (a mixed Sunni-Shi'a area). Saudi Shi'a do not have the breadth of tribal and clan ties to Iraq and Iran as do the Shi'a of Kuwait and Bahrain, though at least one major Shi'a tribal confederation, the Al-Tamim, are present in Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

¶14. (SBU) The Wahhabi Saudi state has a long record of brutal persecution of both Saudi Shi'a and Shi'a living elsewhere in the region. During the military raids of the first and second Saudi states in the 18th and 19th centuries, Shi'a were a frequent target of Wahhabi Saudi violence, including an all-out attack on major Shi'a cities in southern Iraq and the desecration of holy sites there. When the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz, conquered what is now the EP, his fanatical Ikhwan army went on a murderous anti-Shi'a rampage. A watershed moment in this troubled history came in 1979 when thousands of Shi'a, angry at the state, inspired by the Iranian revolution, and organized by a young group of leaders, most notably Hassan Al-Saffar, took to the streets of Qatif in protest. The SAG cracked down, killing a number of the protesters and arresting many

activists. Hundreds of Shi'a, including Al-Saffar, went into exile, initially to Iran but later leaving Iran for Syria, Lebanon, the UK, the U.S., and other western countries.

Al-Saffar and many of his political allies returned to Saudi Arabia in the mid 1990s after reaching a deal with King Fahd in 1993-4. The King agreed to allow the exiles to return, to release Shi'a detained in the Kingdom, and to take steps to improve the situation of the Shi'a; for their part, the returning Shi'a agreed to cease their opposition activities and pursue their goals within the Saudi system.

¶5. (C) Why did the exiled Shi'a return? According to Mohammed Al-Mahfooth, one of their number and now editor-in-chief of a journal on contemporary Islamic issues, "There were two main reasons. First, we realized that, as a minority in Saudi Arabia, we could never hope to change the regime by revolution, as we might have thought in 1979. Second, we felt we were losing touch with our communities here, and we were not effective at helping them to develop from abroad. So we decided to come back and work for our own rights from within." We have heard similar explanations from other Shi'a who were part of the exile movement. As a group, exiled and indigenous leaders made an important tactical decision in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Realizing that they could not wrest control over their destiny from the SAG by opposition and confrontation, they changed their goal to realizing their civil rights as Saudi citizens and their tactics to pushing for reform from within. The same tactical calculus remains relevant today.

¶6. (C) Shi'a activists have consistently emphasized to us their continued commitment to pushing for civil rights and reform within the system; in the words of one of their leaders, "Any place there is room, we are trying to use it." We see considerable evidence that the Shi'a are indeed taking full advantage of every opportunity, especially with the ascension of King Abdullah, whom the Shi'a view as friendly to their aspirations. They were active participants in the petition movement in the last years of King Fahd's reign, signing petitions calling for reform both as a community and, as individuals, in conjunction with other (Sunni) reformers. The Shi'a successfully organized to win all the municipal council seats in EP areas where they enjoyed demographic predominance. The Qatif municipal council, with Jafar Al-Shayeb as its president, will likely prove to be the most organized and active of any in the EP.

¶7. (C) The Shi'a are also pushing the boundaries of what the SAG allows in terms of civil society (ref A), organizing unregistered but tolerated activities ranging from regular cultural and political forums to computer and astronomy clubs to underground film showings. Of the five people appointed to the Dammam branch of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), at least four are Shi'a activists, including Al-Shayeb. The Shi'a are pushing for greater religious freedom and a reduction in discrimination through the NSHR and via direct appeal to senior SAG leaders, albeit with limited success. Pointing to these activities and to their vision of a Saudi Arabia where all citizens enjoy civil rights, some of our contacts argue that the Shi'a are the true Saudi nationalists and reformers.

¶8. (C) Another indication that the Shi'a are, at least for now, committed to working within the system is that Shi'a leaders and activists from a variety of backgrounds are gravitating toward this tactic and that they are actively building bridges with other reform elements in Saudi society.

The returned exiles are the most politically active Saudi Shi'a, were the major force in brokering the 1993-4 deal with King Fahd, and are in the forefront of most of the initiatives mentioned above. (Note: While they do not form a single political block, they are sometimes referred to as "Shirazis" because at the time of their exile many of them followed the late Ayatollah Mohammed Al-Shirazi, who advocated that clerics should play a greater political role in demanding Shi'a rights, although Shirazi opposed the concept of wilayat al-faqih. End note.) Other Shi'a activists, both secular and religious, have also adopted the

tactic of pushing for reform from within, although they do not have the same broad organizational networks of the Shirazis. These activists include former leftists like Najib Al-Khunaizi, who hosts one of the regular cultural forums in Qatif, and purported Saudi Hezbollah leader Hassan Al-Nimr, who participated in the most recent National Dialogue in Abha. The Shirazis, Al-Khunaizi, Al-Nimr, and other Shi'a leaders are also making efforts to reach out to secular and religious reformers from Sunni society, trading visits to each other's forums and majlis and seeking other means for dialogue.

Iran: Religious Ties but Few Political Loyalties

¶9. (S) While there are strong religious ties between the Saudi Shi'a and Iran and the potential for Iranian influence in the EP is a legitimate concern, especially given the increasing bellicosity of Iranian rhetoric and policy, our best assessment is that, under prevailing conditions, the Shi'a are not looking to Tehran for political guidance.

¶10. (S) As argued in ref C, given the importance of the EP to Saudi Arabia's oil industry, Iran has a strategic rationale for laying the groundwork to exert its influence. It also has a history of doing so. The Iranian revolution inspired the Saudi Shi'a to rise up in opposition in 1979, and the Iranians played a role in organizing Saudi Hezbollah in the 1980s. Most Saudi Shi'a clerics have studied extensively in Iran, especially Qom, and many politically active Shi'a spent time in Iran in the early and mid 1980s. A militant Saudi Shi'a group, at least inspired if not directed by Iran, carried out the attack on the Al-Khobar military barracks in the summer of 1996. More recently, a few of our Shi'a contacts have claimed that there are active pro-Iranian networks in the Qatif area and alleged other signs of Iranian activity, although a much larger number of others discount these claims. (Note: Recent sensitive reports from other channels also suggest possible Shi'a links with militant Shi'a in Iran, Iraq, and/or Lebanon. One report suggests that Iranian-affiliated Iraqi militias may have begun low-key efforts to establish contacts in the EP, and another report suggests that one Saudi Shi'a may have visited a Lebanese Shi'a leader to seek financial support. End note.)

¶11. (S) The vast majority of our Shi'a contacts, however, have told ConOffs that they see no evidence of current Iranian efforts to exert political influence in the EP. Our contacts, who include community activists, political leaders, journalists, businessmen, cultural figures, academics, and sheikhs, many of whom studied in Iran, are also generally skeptical of Iranian motives as they pertain to Saudi Arabia.

We heard over and over variants of the following statement: "We were used by Iran before, and we won't let it happen again. Their interests are completely different than ours." Indeed, the exiled Shirazis appear to have left Iran in the mid 1980s because it became clear they were being used: several contacts independently told us that the group left because they refused Iranian pressure to organize or take credit for sabotage operations against Saudi oil installations.

¶12. (C) Time and time again, Shi'a sheikhs have explained that the Saudi Shi'a prefer to study in Najaf or Karbala (where Arabic is spoken everywhere, including outside the religious community), have much stronger historical ties to religious institutions in Iraq, and studied in Qom only because Saddam Hussein's regime made it impossible for them to study in Iraq. They also caution that a Shi'a who has studied at a hawza in Qom would not necessarily share a pro-Iranian religious or political perspective and note that all the important ayatollahs, including those from Najaf, have hawzas in Qom. All of our contacts concur that among Saudi Shi'a who emulate a marja' or mujtahid, the large majority of Saudi Shi'a follow Iranian-born but Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, with the rest divided among a

number of other ayatollahs.

¶13. (S) The current role and activity of Saudi Hezbollah remains a question mark about which we have been able to develop only limited information. Some contacts claims the group no longer exists, but prevailing evidence suggests that it encompasses a small group of religious figures who believe in the concept of wilayat al-faqih, emulate Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i as their marja', but have few current followers. Our contacts report that its leaders are not very active politically, do not take their cue from the Iranian regime, and do not espouse violence (at least not currently, in all three cases). While we continue to seek additional information on Saudi Hezbollah, what limited knowledge we have supports the views espoused by our contacts. We do not know of any anti-SAG or anti-American violence ascribed to any Saudi Shi'a group since the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996; at least one of Saudi Hezbollah's purported leaders has participated in the National Dialogue (suggesting that the SAG does not consider the movement or the individual as much of a threat and that he supports the Dialogue's concept); and we have heard that other Shi'a leaders have, over time, convinced Saudi Hezbollah's leaders that violence would not help the Shi'a cause. We cannot rule out the possibility that Iran or its proxies could recruit and train small Saudi Shi'a cells to carry out disruptive or terrorist activities. However, we cannot see such cells developing a broad following given the present Shi'a leadership and their strategy unless there are major changes in the regional political landscape.

The Impact of Iraq

¶14. (C) The Saudi Shi'a follow events in Iraq with intense interest. In stark contrast to non-Shi'a Saudis, most Shi'a express support for the U.S. intervention in Iraq despite the current strife and violence. Many Shi'a contacts have explicitly thanked ConOffs for the U.S. role in freeing their coreligionists in Iraq from Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime and helping them obtain political power commensurate with their numbers. Saudi Shi'a feel deep emotional and religious ties to Iraq and look forward to visiting Shi'a holy sites and participating in religious festivals there as soon as the security situation permits. The expanded political and religious freedoms for Shi'a in Iraq have empowered Saudi Shi'a to push further than they previously dared against SAG restrictions on religious freedom and civil society. For example, contacts have linked expanded Ashura celebrations in Qatif, as well as more cautious expressions of Shi'a identity elsewhere in the Kingdom, directly to the new situation in Iraq.

¶15. (S) However, although Saudi Shi'a are certainly aware that Shi'a form a significant part of the population on the Arab side of the gulf, to date we have seen no indication that the Saudi Shi'a have any realistic vision of a pan-Arab Shi'a political block. Any such realization of an Arab "Shi'a crescent" would have to be led by Iraqi Shi'a, and at this point, as several contacts have noted to us, domestic challenges occupy their full attention. Saudi Shi'a are not currently traveling to Iraq in significant numbers, and political and religious contacts between Saudi and Iraqi Shi'a post-Iraqi liberation, while they have occurred, appear to have been limited to date.

The Future of the Shi'a Strategy and U.S. Policy

¶16. (S) Will the Shi'a strategy of seeking to realize their rights as Saudi citizens by engaging the SAG hold firm over the next several years? We believe that it will, as long as the SAG does not backtrack on reform through a change in policy or leadership and/or as long as there are not compelling external pressures or influences that change their calculus of interests. Although Shi'a leaders have

frequently expressed to us their frustration with the slow pace of reform and with the continued discrimination against the Shi'a community, they have invested a great deal in the strategy of engagement and it is slowly bearing fruit in the form of some advances in religious freedom (in Qatif at least) and civil society. If the SAG does backtrack, e.g. by clamping down harshly on unlicensed civil society organizations or undoing the limited measure of religious freedom recently gained by the Shi'a, or if other elements of the current equilibrium change, the strategic calculations of the Shi'a leadership could change as well. While we have not seen any signs of radical young Shi'a leaders who disagree with the goals or tactics of the current leadership, such leaders could emerge if sectarian violence initiated by Sunni extremists spreads uncontained to Saudi Arabia, if the employment situation for young Shi'a worsens, if Ayatollah Sistani is succeeded by a more radical cleric as marja' to most Saudi Shi'a, or if conflict breaks out with Iran.

¶17. (S) The argument outlined above, that the Saudi Shi'a remain committed to a strategic choice to push for realization of their rights as citizens from within the Saudi system and, under current conditions, do not entertain any serious external political loyalties, has several important implications for U.S. policymakers. Most Saudi Shi'a currently see their interests as directly aligned with U.S. interests in key respects, particularly with the U.S. interest in promoting participatory governance and human rights in the Middle East as an antidote to extremism. They appreciate any pressure the U.S. puts on the Saudi government to reform, although they wish the U.S. would increase this pressure and worry that other interests, such as regional stability and security of the oil supply, cause the U.S. to draw back from urging greater steps toward political reform.

¶18. (S) The most important implication of this argument is therefore that it is unlikely that the vast majority of Saudi Shi'a would support Iranian or Iranian-proxy interference in Saudi Arabia as long as the current equilibrium holds, particularly the promise for gradual reform. King Abdullah embodies this promise of reform, particularly for the Shi'a, and with good cause: no less a figure than Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz told the Ambassador that King Abdullah has decided to give Saudi more religious freedom as part of an effort to better incorporate them into Saudi national life. By supporting the reform process, the U.S. is also playing a role, an important one in Shi'a eyes, in maintaining the current equilibrium. (Comment: As suggested in ref C, the USG can certainly use SAG concern about potential Iranian influence as one means of urging the SAG to grant fuller rights to its Shi'a citizens. End comment.) A secondary, more tactical implication is that the Saudi Shi'a currently make natural allies in U.S. efforts to promote political reform and human rights in Saudi Arabia. Post is already directing some programmatic resources in this direction and will explore this potential further in a later cable.

Sources

¶19. (SBU) This cable draws on hundreds of conversations over the past eight months between CG, PolOff, and PAO and a diverse group of Saudi Shi'a contacts, as well as on related observations and on publicly available sources such as Saudi Shi'a websites and other reports. We have reported many of these conversations and observations in previous cables (NOTAL), including RIYADH 964, RIYADH 179, RIYADH 42, 2005 RIYADH 9142 (reform, Iran, Iraq); RIYADH 3306, RIYADH 1741, RIYADH 1380, 2005 RIYADH 7589, 2003 RIYADH 2698 (reform); RIYADH 1706, RIYADH 1377, RIYADH 1252 (civil society); RIYADH 1461, RIYADH 280, RIYADH 275 (Shi'a leadership); 2005 RIYADH 9048, 2005 RIYADH 8565 (Iraq, Iran); RIYADH 1053 (Iraq); 2005 RIYADH 8741 (Iran); RIYADH 2840 (reactions to Mubarak); and 2005 RIYADH 8323 (EP governance).

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
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